



PROJECT MUSE®

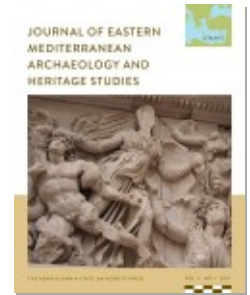
---

## In Turkey, Museums Need Reciprocity, Not Only Repatriation

Charles Gates

Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies, Volume 5, Number 1, 2017, pp. 106-109 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/649738>

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

## In Turkey, Museums Need Reciprocity, Not Only Repatriation

CHARLES GATES

Department of Archaeology, Faculty of Humanities and Letters, Bilkent University

Bilkent 06800, Ankara Turkey; gates@bilkent.edu.tr

In spring 2006, works of the German sculptor Ernst Barlach (1870–1938) were exhibited in Istanbul and Ankara (Fig. 1). I remember my amazement as I walked

among the sculptures placed in the courtyard of the administrative building of the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara, a restored Ottoman han. Amazed, because I had never experienced in Ankara an exhibit like this, works of a distinguished foreign artist. Indeed, that exhibit was unique. Although private museums in Istanbul, such as the Sakıp Sabancı Museum and the Pera Museum, have shown art works brought from abroad, museums in Ankara and other Turkish cities, almost entirely state museums, have rarely done so, even with the help of outside institutions (in this case, the Goethe Institute). This is an avenue that needs to be pursued. Although the repatriation of items illegally taken from Turkey deserves support, particularly since the UNESCO



FIG. 1

Ernst Barlach, "Pietà. Project of a War Memorial in Stralsund." A woman holds a dead soldier on her lap. Bronze figure after a plaster model of 1932. (Photo by W. Sauber. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons [[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:G%C3%BCstrow\\_Gertrudenkapelle\\_-\\_Barlachsammlung\\_Pieta.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:G%C3%BCstrow_Gertrudenkapelle_-_Barlachsammlung_Pieta.jpg)].)

conventions of the 1970s, the educative and cultural mission of museums should not stop here but should promote reciprocal arrangements with foreign museums and institutes. The benefits to the Turkish public would be huge (Fig. 2).

The Turkish museum is typically a fortress, a place where objects found in the country are stored and secured. Sources of the objects are typically archaeological excavations, but other provenances can include construction sites, abandoned churches (Orthodox icons painted before the Orthodox-Muslim population exchange, carried out between Greece and Turkey in 1923), abandoned cemeteries (tombstones of Muslims, Christians, and Jews), farm fields, anywhere really.

Highlights of a museum's collection will be displayed for the public. Certain museums have outstanding collections, with many unique items. The Istanbul Archaeological Museum, which contains objects excavated during the late Ottoman Empire in its provinces of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria-Palestine, and Cyprus as well as discoveries from Turkey, Ottoman and Republican, is preeminent. Ankara's Museum of Anatolian Civilizations is key for pre-classical Turkey. Regional museums, developed since World War II at an ever accelerating pace, contain recent finds that can certainly be of great importance, but the range of these museums is local—with

occasional exchanges from other regional museums, although not always identified as such.

Displays tend to be set for a long duration. Updating is infrequent. Objects not used in a display will be condemned to the storerooms, to be seen only by museum personnel or by scholars if they have applied for formal permission from the museum or from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Directors of ongoing excavations are normally granted access to objects found at their sites, at least during the period an excavation or study season is in progress (usually the summer months). Objects without a pedigree—unpublished or unprovenanced artifacts—languish forgotten or ignored, because the outside researcher has no way to request to see them. The researcher cannot provide the identification needed for this request, because he or she will not have access to the museum inventories, with their numbers.

The focus of most museums is on antiquity. The medieval and early modern world—Byzantine, Seljuk, and Ottoman—is typically a sideline. The so-called “ethnographic museums” serve as repositories for Ottoman objects, such as clothing, other textiles, woodwork, furniture, household possessions (ceramics, embroideries), calligraphy (Quran manuscripts, imperial documents), weapons, and a range of metal objects. Recreations of rooms with mannequins to illustrate



FIG. 2

On a T-shirt designed for a Turkish tour group in Berlin, a young giant on the frieze of the Great Altar, Pergamon, sheds tears of blood for the end of his exile in Germany and his return to Bergama, Turkey. T-shirt designed by Ertan Turgut. (Photo by M.-H. Gates.)

aspects of daily life, such as marriage practices (henna night), are frequently seen.

The large cities, Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir, have state museums of painting and sculpture, for art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that begins with works in the western European styles. Ankara's Painting and Sculpture Museum, for example, is full of paintings in the Impressionist vein. Museums devoted to other subjects exist as well, such as military history (Istanbul's Naval Museum and Military Museum), railroads, toys, etc. Private museums, a phenomenon that took off with the opening of the Sadberk Hanım Museum, Istanbul, in 1980, display not only collections of antiquities and Turkish and Islamic art, core interests here in Turkey, but also modern art of recent decades (such as Istanbul Modern) and, distinctively, the material witness of industrial activities (the Rahmi Koç Industrial Museums, in Istanbul and Ankara) and of business (the Ottoman Bank Museum, housed in SALT Galata, a cultural institution sponsored by Garanti Bank). Other private museums might showcase a writer's home and work, such as the Sait Faik Abasıyanık Museum on Burgaz Island, Istanbul, administered since 1964 by the Darüşşafaka Society, an institution that since 1863 has sponsored education for orphans, or even the Museum of Innocence, established by Orhan Pamuk in 2012 to complement his novel of the same name.

History museums, however, are rare. Nowhere is there a museum of the history of Turkey that might compare in scope, if not scale, with the German Historical Museum in Berlin. Nor are there museums for the comprehensive history of a city, Istanbul or Ankara, say, as exemplified by the Museum of London. Museums focusing on specific events do exist, though, such as the Panorama 1453 History Museum, sponsored by the City of Istanbul, that brings to life the Ottoman conquest of the city. And Ankara has its Liberation War Museum and Museum of the Republic, which consist of the First and Second Parliament buildings, respectively, each administered as a separate museum by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, each with exhibits devoted to the early Republic.

One unusual and particularly successful example of a history museum is the City Museum in Tire, a small city in Aegean Turkey, that opened in 2014. The displays in this museum feature objects that belonged to named people, which give a vivid, personalized sense of life in this city during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

With such a list you might think the museum scene in Turkey is lively and engaging. In Istanbul, yes. Elsewhere, more can be done. Shortcomings are many. The state museums of archaeology have a certain sameness about them. The exhibit designs are done by a central team based in Ankara. Explanatory panels, whether in Turkish or English, can be well done and instructive, but they can also be inadequate, leaving the visitor wondering exactly what he has been seeing. Although antiquities are varied, thanks to the many different cultures that flourished in this land, the routine nature of displays of ceramics, for example, dulls the intellect. The ethnographic museums, with their reconstructions of Ottoman life, are particularly repetitive. One can hardly blame the average Turkish person for quickly thinking that he or she has nothing much to learn from visiting a museum. Museums are taken for granted.

In this light, does it really make sense to devote all emotions, energies, and resources to the recovery of looted artifacts? Apart from a matter of pride, and the due punishment of thieves, smugglers, and arrogant collectors, does the Turkish public care if more Bronze Age seals or Greco-Roman figurines are recovered – and put into a museum storeroom? Probably not, but pride and punishment are of course strong motivators.

I would encourage a new, enlarged mission for the museums in this country. Alongside these efforts for repatriation of objects illegally removed, I propose that the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (home of the directorate of state museums) develop cooperation with museums and institutions outside Turkey, in order to exhibit objects and themes from other countries. For example, like the exhibit of the sculptures of Barlach, Turkey should promote exhibits of art works from foreign countries. These exhibits need not aim to show world-famous objects. Instead, with loans of objects from storerooms of foreign museums, lessons can be imparted about different periods of history, different art styles, themes, and human achievement. Here in Turkey, we learn about Turkey. That's fine. But what do we know even about the countries next door? Bulgaria, in ancient, medieval, or modern times? Other countries around the Black Sea? Iraq and Syria? Iran? Greece, even? Turkish objects go to Europe and the USA—recent exhibits include “Europalia Arts Festival—Turkey,” in Belgium (October 6, 2015–January 31, 2016), and “The Golden Age of King Midas,” on Gordion and the Phrygians, at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania

(February 13–November 27, 2016). But nothing comparable about cultures outside Anatolia appears in Turkey, apart from exhibits at certain private museums, as noted above.

Some specific proposals:

- The Ministry of Culture and Tourism should appoint a curator for each museum, at least for large and medium-sized museums. The curator will be responsible for the scholarly oversight of a museum's collection: research and publication; the scholarly contents of displays; and education of visitors. The curator should have a PhD in archaeology, art history, history, or another subject relevant to the nature of the museum. The curator should be competent in a major international research language—English (preferred), French, or German—in order to communicate with colleagues abroad.
- A major shortcoming of Turkish museums has been the lack of personnel with scholarly qualifications. A career as a researcher in a museum has been virtually impossible, with few exceptions (at the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, for example). As a result, museums are not centers of active research. They do not produce scholarly publications of their holdings and exhibits are intellectually threadbare, often depending on outside help (the excavators, typically).
- Incoming exhibits. They need not be blockbusters; modest in scale is fine. They could include:
  - Photographs, of art works, buildings, places, anything relevant to the theme of the exhibit.
  - Paintings, sculptures, or other objects – items of lesser renown from the storerooms of other museums, foreign and Turkish, but pedagogically useful to illustrate styles, historical periods, or themes.
  - Exhibits should not come to one museum only, but should circulate among museums. This will ensure that all provincial museums have a share in these programs, that Istanbul and other large cities do not monopolize these efforts.
- Outgoing exhibits.
  - Exhibits originating in one museum can be sent to other Turkish cities, as well as abroad.
  - Like the incoming exhibits, they can be modest in scope, and include

- Photographs;
- Objects neglected in storerooms, which can be useful to illustrate styles, periods, and themes.

The aim of this program is to increase the intellectual mission of Turkish museums, bring an international outlook to all museums in order that people throughout the country can learn more about the world outside in both past and present, and bring to the provincial cities a taste of the cultural advantages that Istanbul in particular possesses. The triumphalism felt about an object removed illegally and repatriated after a hard-fought, expensive legal battle should not be an end in itself, but should be an occasion to create new links with foreign institutions that lead to a dynamic exposure to the art, architecture, and history of the entire world.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### Magical Materialism: On the Hidden Danger of Repatriation Disputes

NEIL ASHER SILBERMAN

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Coherit Associates LLC; neil.silberman@coherit.com

In an era of globe-girdling resource flows, angry neo-nationalist movements, and increasing inequality between the powerful and the powerless, it's hardly a wonder that demands for the repatriation of cultural property by former colonial subjects from their former colonial overlords (and cultural institutions) have become a hotly debated ethical concern (Nilsson Stutz 2013).<sup>1</sup> Greece's unanswered call for the return of the Parthenon ("Elgin") Marbles from the British Museum (Fig. 1; Beresford 2015) is only the most famous of many; the longstanding demand of the Egyptian government for the repatriation of the famous bust of Nefertiti from Berlin's Neues Museum (Fig. 2; Ikram 2011); Cyprus's ultimately successful claims for the return of Byzantine frescoes looted from Lysi during the 1974 invasion, displayed until 2012 in the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, the Menil Collection, Houston (Fig. 3; Ogden 2015); and the endless wrangles over legal title to the Dead Sea Scrolls